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THE GREEK QUESTION AND ANSWER

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BY

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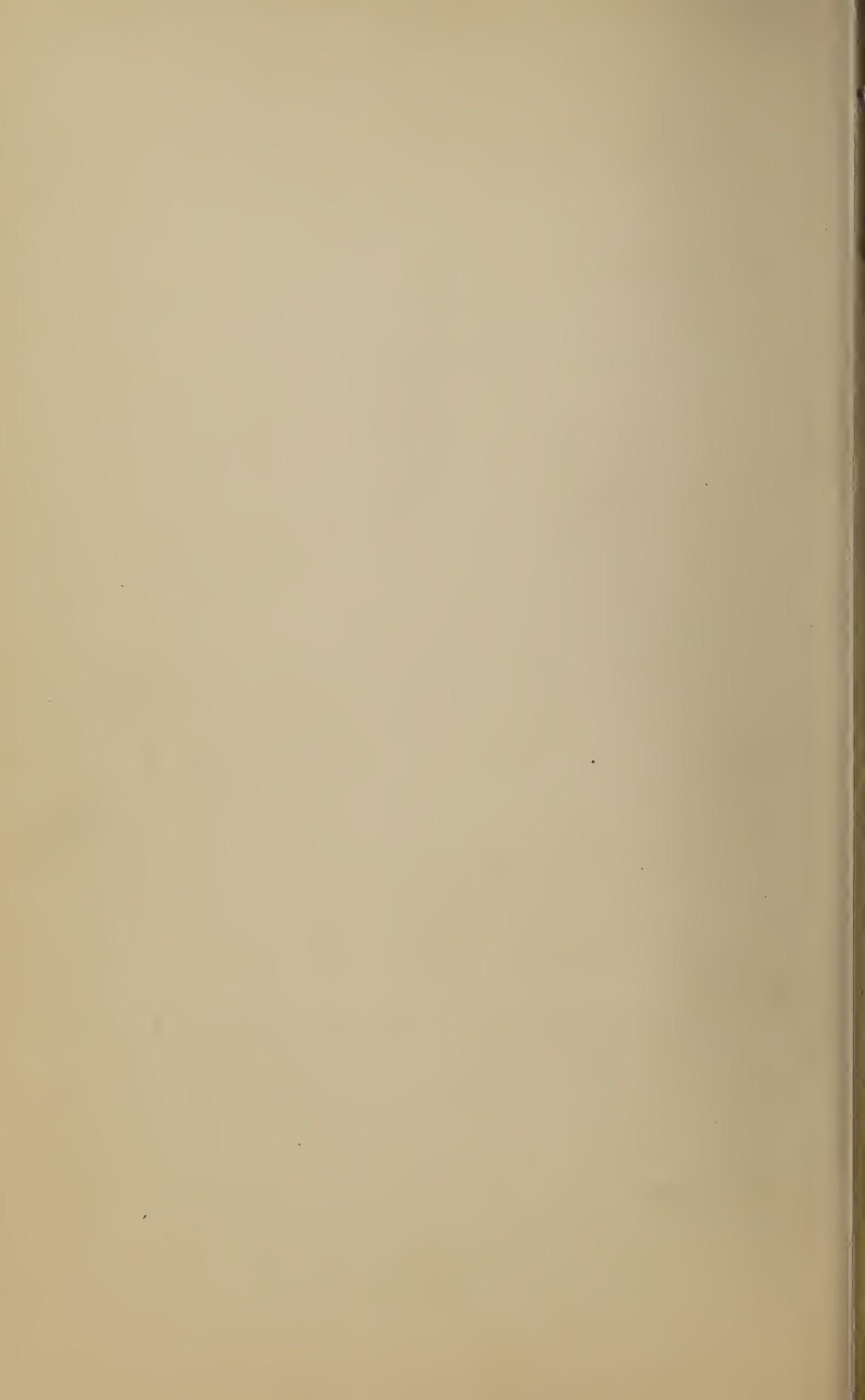
A PAPER READ BEFORE THE HARVARD CLUB OF RHODE ISLAND IN
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*Mr. President, Gentlemen, and Fellow-members
of the Harvard Club of Rhode Island:*

I AM puzzled at the outset by the words commonly used in designating the subject assigned me for discussion: “The Greek Question.” If this question is Greek, then Greek should be its answer.

But no! the first answer which I hear is French and German. Is it possible that we are again to witness the ancient horrors of Babel? Are we to have a modern confusion of tongues? But those who answer our Greek question with French and German confound me in more ways than one, for though they stoutly maintain that their solution of this Greek problem is the very best, their one chief qualification for dealing with it is that they know no Greek. They never can have done with dwelling upon the marvellous completeness, the spherical integrity of their ignorance of Greek, of the very language at whose educational demerits they point with the finger of certainty.

“We know no Greek, not we, nor have we any use for Greek. Give us Latin if you must, French, German, anything but Greek!” they cry, and they dwell upon the delights of knowing French and German. This is what they say, and we listen to them expecting information about French and German. With these engines of the “modernist” they must be marvellously familiar; no

doubt they have discovered in them uses new and beauties unperceived till now. What then is our surprise when we hear these not wholly unprosperous persons say: "Oh no! we do not know German, and with French we are unfamiliar; but see how utterly wretched and down-trodden we are. Look at the lingering misery into which generations before us have been plunged,— it is all because our forefathers, like ourselves, were forcibly debarred from the study of French and German, and were dosed with Greek instead." Since these friends of ours, though they are so entirely miserable, cannot in their own persons have been made so by Greek which they do not know, we recall Herbert Spencer's doctrine of hereditary tendencies and begin to attribute their sad plight to the inoculation of some remote ancestor with Greek, a subtle poison which thus has tainted their blood. "No! no!" they hastily reply, "not one of our ancestors ever knew Greek, though they all spent endless time and took untold pains in a laborious failure to acquire that baleful tongue. They would have been so much more useful, so much wiser, so much better off in every way if, instead of being forced not to learn Greek, they had been allowed to learn French and German." When with genuine sympathy for these accumulated woes ancestral, we venture to ask for further enlightenment, when we would know more precisely what were these lost opportunities in the years of an irredeemable past, we are startled to find that there were no opportunities, or next to none, for learning French and German in those dark days of yore. We are at a

loss to answer the assailants of what has been called ‘A College Fetich.’ The very fact that they have chosen so grotesquely inapplicable a phrase in describing the teaching of Greek, reveals beforehand that they know not whereof they speak. What can be done with an adversary who, when you would prove to him by going into particulars that the teaching of Greek, as an indispensable part of a liberal education, is no Fetichism, says, “You must not talk to me about Greek, for I do not know the language”; while, if you seek to argue at length against this same opponent’s assertion that French and German are better suited to the needs of the opening mind, he checkmates your first move by saying, “Softly, my friend, I am acquainted with neither of those languages, therefore you must argue with some one else”? The discussion seems to be hemmed in by an adamantine fatality and we reluctantly but resolutely turn away from this opponent of Greek. Yet, as we go, we yearn towards him, when we think of all the sorrows of his race. Since argument is impossible, we are impelled to cry out to him in the words of King Richard:

..For God’s sake let us sit upon the ground
And tell sad stories of the deaths of Kings,
How some have been deposed, some slain in war,
Some haunted by the ghosts they have deposed.”

Tusting that the College Fetich may, when he scans it more closely, prove after all to be not Greek but some ghost which our friend is striving to depose, let us bid him good-bye and remember that there are men who know Greek and French and German. To these may be com-

mended certain reasons showing the inexpediency of substituting modern for ancient languages in a college education and the frailty of

THE “MODERNISTS’” HUMANITIES.

In the first place there is no doubt that the intrinsic value of the Greek language as a perfect means for expressing thought is greater than that of any modern tongue, and even supposing that French or German, one or both, expressed ideas with the fulness and subtlety of the Greek, nevertheless the fact remains that with all their idiomatic differences English, French, and German are yet so similar in structure that the translation of a given idea from one to the other of them is far too easy. Translation from English into Greek or from Greek into English is a searching process which enlarges a pupil’s hold upon his mother-tongue far more effectively. Indeed, for the better learning of English, a training in the classics is most helpful, and one reason why both of the professors of English at Harvard defend Greek is to be found in their belief that the boy who learns Greek as he should is perfecting as he should his knowledge of English. The effort to become familiar with the nicely adjusted framework of Greek forms and with the logical scheme of Greek Syntax gives to every learner a new conception of the power of language to express thought, and prepares him to overcome in early years many impediments which stand in the way of clearness of thought itself. Nor should we fail to recollect, when we talk of Greek as

a means for gaining a full knowledge of English, the help which Greek gives in understanding the large number of Greek derivatives commonly and uncommonly used in our mother-tongue.

In the second place there is no doubt that Greek literature, as a means of stimulating the powers of imagination, is superior to the literature of France and Germany. This is true, though we may admit for the argument's sake that French literature or even German has an equal range and equal rank with the Greek. The approaches to French and German must be made by reading books of a more or less ephemeral character. These stories and plays deal necessarily with commonplaces already familiar to the learner in his own language; they do not involve the understanding of characters and events that have the dignity, the freshness, and the simplicity which should be set before a young learner's mind if, in guiding the education of youth, we would not wholly lose sight of the formation of character. These simple French and German books at most tell the beginner the same things which he can learn from similar books in English.

If it be urged that more than this rudimentary study should be required in modern languages and that then we shall have something to counterbalance the claim which is made for Greek,—if, for instance, in French the plays of Racine and the essays of Montaigne, and in German Goethe's 'Iphigenia' and Schiller's 'Bride of Messina' are to be read,—then, I say, you will never be able to enforce this high standard, you increase the learner's difficulties only on paper and in your printed requirements.

You ask him to substitute for hard work which he can do, work so hard that he cannot do it. Instead of measurably succeeding in an attempt to understand the words and ways of the Homeric heroes, or of Xenophon and his soldiers, the young pupil will disastrously fail in fathoming the allusions and the sophistications of modern literature. And you will find moreover that, in order to give your pupil the dimmest appreciation of the great works of French or German literature, you have to familiarize him in some way with the leading facts of Greek literary history. So true is it that all modern literatures go back to the one truly original literature of our past, which is that of Greece; so true is it that the foundation of all systematic and thorough literary study must be laid in the study of Greek. French and German cannot then be substituted for Greek in the preparation for college, unless we are willing to decrease the amount of work now required as the necessary outfit for a profitable college course. This is so because,—the moment we attempt to make up by quantity for the easy quality of the knowledge required,—we find involved in the intelligent study of the higher works of modern literatures an acquaintance with Greek facts and thoughts.

Even supposing that some scheme could be devised to meet this objection, there is one point which we have not as yet considered. Any plan for the study of modern languages, if it is to give the habits of self-command, sustained application, and concentration of thought, which are now acquired by diligent study in the classical course, must be a systematic one. A certain number of years must

be methodically devoted to such work, but this whole system may successfully be brought to confusion by any youth who takes the short cut to a fluent knowledge of French and German which is always open to him. When you have constructed the cage you will discover that your bird has flown, and a brief stay abroad before or after the age of twelve or fourteen will prepare a boy for entering college without having formed the habit of regular work and without knowing what thoroughness means. The French and German substitute proposed for elementary Greek is then too easy or too hard and its discipline may always be eluded, for there is a royal road to the knowledge of every modern language.

But let us resign even this point; let us say that black is white, that those who know modern languages best have learned them in school and in course, instead of absorbing them by living where the atmosphere is impregnated with them, where only French or only German is spoken. Let us rescue our tender youth from French and German nurses and prohibit them from travelling abroad until they are graduated from college. Let us keep them by force in the cage which the "modernists" have artfully devised for them, and let them there learn, in many years and with much labor, what they might have learned better elsewhere with no effort and in less than half the time which the "modernists'" system prescribes. This system which substitutes modern for ancient languages will put our pupil between the ages of ten and sixteen under

foreign teachers. If we insist upon native American teaching in French and German it will be defective, especially for beginners; if we do not, then no matter how excellent in character and how high in their purposes the French and German masters may be, they will to some extent be out of sympathy with our methods and will misunderstand our morals. This objection at first sounds contemptible, and it naturally provokes answering jeers aimed at the supposed prejudice and "knownothingism" of such an objector. But, aside from cases in point nearer home, I have the warrant of no inconsiderable English experience in taking this view.

In what is called the 'Modern Side' of English schools—I have in mind one in particular, well known for the success with which modern languages are taught in it—the masters in French and German are commonly Englishmen. The reason which met my inquiries was, that native French and German teachers failed to understand the ways of the boys and the school, and that this failure more than offset their superior knowledge. I recollect vividly that when I taught French and German in the school just alluded to, whither I was called for a few weeks during the absence of the head master of the 'modern side,' one of my duties was to be present and see that no harm came to the boys while they listened to occasional lectures on the French Drama from a one-eyed communist, who was said by the boys to have emerged reeking with the blood of freshly-slaughtered millionaires from the ruins of his native Paris.

A monograph¹ has recently appeared in Berlin upon the career of Germans employed as masters in England. In this book we read of their miserable failure and of the enormous amount of suffering which they have to endure. This is largely due, no doubt, to the hideous mismanagement of private schools; but a great part of it is as certainly attributable to the difficulty which any human being must find in the attempt to deal with young pupils whose language, tastes, and ways are unfamiliar to him. Of course the older the pupils are the more completely these difficulties disappear; but in a preparatory school they must always remain very considerable. My conclusion is accordingly as follows. Let us make no attempt to substitute an impossibly mature knowledge of French and German for the rudiments of Greek, since this will surely disorganize the already insufficiently articulated system in our preparatory schools. Let us, however, in the interest quite as much of the Classics as in that of Science or of Modern languages, require the rudiments of French and German as a part of the needed preparation for college. Thus modern languages will take their place as necessary but subordinate parts in our preparatory training. With any one who urges that this overburdens a boy in the years before he comes to college we will argue when it is proved to our satisfaction that the American school-boy is not about as much underworked as his German contemporary is overworked.

¹ *Der Deutsche Lehrer in England* by Heinrich Reichardt; Berlin 1883.

THE MODERN HUMANITIES.

The second answer to the Greek Question which comes to me is Natural Science. Here I confess that I find myself far more inclined to come to terms, since now I have to meet no “modernist” attempting to cheapen the college degree, but an antagonist—I wish that I could find a better word—who represents a new development of human thought and energy, and who says that the time has now come when room must be made for a new discipline which this development requires, a discipline no whit easier than the ‘humanities’ which it now threatens to supplant. Whatever it is that the scientific man wants, we may be sure that there is work in it. What I maintain is that this new training is needed to supplement not to supplant the old, that by combining the old and the new we shall have a broader and better preparation for modern life, which let us trust has grown broader and better,—THE MODERN HUMANITIES, a very different thing from the “modernists” humanities. I say that the new is needed not to supplant but to supplement the old, because the first difficulty which meets me, when I consider the important part played by natural science in modern life, is the unimportant part allotted to it in the course ordinarily pursued for a college degree. Shall those who do not devote themselves to science, but who choose law and theology, be wholly shut out from the new light? Surely this is not a wise preparation for any man in these days when science and religion are so frequently, and often so ignorantly, pitted against each other.

That I am not alone in this opinion is proved by the address to which we all listened six months ago to-night.¹ What we have heard on this point from a member of our club, whose experience and whose exceptional knowledge of educational subjects claim our admiring respect, is substantially as follows: ‘Natural science should be studied in classical schools, for even literary men cannot afford to be wholly ignorant of the great powers that move the world, but they should be studied as useful knowledge only, not as a discipline.’ The scientific man should on the other hand, as we are told by the same high authority, learn languages—no Greek however, and only ‘a limited amount of Latin for the present’—merely so far as they are essential to the power of ‘observing, interpreting, and ruling natural phenomena,’ i. e.: ‘as tools only, not as a discipline.’

I agree heartily that natural science should be studied in classical schools, but I maintain—and here I have the misfortune to differ from the speaker at Newport—that the classics should be taught in scientific schools, and in fact that there should be no subdivision of preparatory schools into classical and scientific. To separate, during their years of preparatory study, small boys who are to live together when they are older and have entered college, is to frustrate one of the best moral influences now at work in our community, the feeling of comradeship among college students which brings in its train the good-fellowship of after years. The mistrusts and misunderstandings, which are sure to arise between freshmen prepared in the

See in *The Popular Science Monthly*, November, 1883, an article entitled “The Greek Question: remarks made at the dinner of the Harvard Club of Rhode Island, Newport, August 25, 1883. By Josiah Parsons Cooke, Professor of Chemistry in Harvard College.”

new scientific schools and those who come from the classical ones, fill me with prophetic dismay; for how can the immaterial circumstance that the names of all are published in the same catalogue bring about an ‘entente cordiale’ between these two warring factions? At this proposed subdivision, which creates two ways of preparation for college, I therefore demur for social reasons as well as on the educational ground that the modern humanities must and can give the classical student his share, not only in the information but also in the education and the training to be derived from Natural Science. I am also inclined to demur at the implication contained in the words already quoted above: “for even literary men cannot afford to be wholly ignorant of the great powers that move the world.” I fail to understand how it can be made evident that a literary man, as such, could be wholly ignorant of the great powers which move the world. If literature and the study of language have so restricted a sphere that the world can move without them, it is time to abandon such studies. If language is not worth anything to the scientific man for some higher use than that of a tool, if he needs no discipline from the study of literature, then by all means let him abandon them, but then let the rest of the world abandon them with him.

We are thus brought face to face with an uncomfortably fundamental question. Is there not after all a moving force over which the study of language and literature gives us control? Shall we so lightly esteem this force or these forces,—for it is many, though I shall rightly name it as one,—that we can believe that any scientific man, be

he physician, engineer, or chemist, may go unpunished if he remains wholly unfamiliar with it? For my part, I am sure there is such a force, and that every man, whether he is a lawyer or a doctor, a chemist or a clergyman, must make himself in some degree a master of the arts by which this force is understood before he can be suitably designated as Master of Arts or as Bachelor of Arts.

The moving power of which I speak is not electricity, nor is it gravity, but it uses these forces and all others as its own. It acts in and through everything which strongly appeals to individuals and effectively enlists the united endeavor of communities. This power dwells in all the great works of the past whether of literature, sculpture, architecture, or painting. The first, the freshest, the fullest, and the most potent presentation of it is given in the masterpieces of the great Greek poets, artists, and philosophers. The power of which I speak is BEAUTY. We cannot with impunity refuse to study and to understand beauty; for to misunderstand beauty is but the first false step, and the next may lead to a misunderstanding of right and wrong when we have become the unconscious servants of some debased and debasing makeshift for beauty. All the glorious impossibilities which have been made possible, all the seemingly remediless harms which have in the end proved harmless, came under the transforming influence of this omnipotent and omnipresent preserver. For omnipotent and omnipresent it is, though labor and thought be required to see it aright and to feel its full power. ‘Good things are hard,’ says the Greek proverb, to which may be added, ‘Beauty is good.’

In order to extort from unwilling human nature the sacrifices demanded by any and every great end, it is needful that the hearts of men should be moved, and for this something more than the logic of facts must provide. Something must enlist their enthusiasm which though not a fact may, with long struggle and great hardship, be made almost a fact. In short we are moved to united and effective action by ideals only, and ideals appeal to us only in proportion to the force with which they compel our hearts. This compelling force, this moving power, is in them when they are clothed with beauty, this force is beauty. To be able to detect this force and to make others alive to its presence must therefore always be an essential part—I had almost said THE essential part—in preparation for leading an intelligent life. All this can as little be left out in the training of a liberally educated man of science as in that of a literary man. Every completely educated human being must be brought under the fullest influence of beauty in its purest form, because he is a man and requires its humanizing influence.

If there is any period in the history of our race when beauty came down to earth, as it were, and there, in close and constant companionship with men, lived in all their thoughts and works, then it follows that a study of the records and monuments of that period will bring us under the strongest and most immediate influence of beauty. Few will be found—and I should not despair of their conversion when found—to deny that there was such an unparalleled epoch while the Greeks ran through their short career upon earth. Why then should these pricelessly

fresh and vivid impressions, the lessons learnt by our race in its youth, not be brought within the horizon of every college-bred man? Should any invasion of facts be suffered to deprive us of our intellectual youth, or to enfeeble and frustrate the one power most effectual in enabling us to mould all facts to our enlightened will?

There is but one possible analogy to the singular position which the children of Hellas occupy in our past, and that is to be found in the unique importance of the children of Israel in every education which is to establish sane and stable religious conviction. The lessons which Jewish thought and Jewish history can and must teach us are taught unceasingly and are taught well. These lessons do not depend for their right understanding upon a detailed study of Hebrew, the less so because the more essential records of Christianity are lodged in Greek writings though their inspiration is Jewish. The insight into beauty, on the other hand, which is given us by Greece is not to be gained at second hand, through translations and explanations. We need all the help which translations and explanations can lend, after hard work on the intricacies of the original Greek. The beauty of every Greek masterpiece is inseparable from the words of the original, for the excellence here resides in a perfect union of shape, sound, and sense. The influence of the diligent study of Greek issues in a subtle refinement of the taste, a ‘purification of the emotions,’ to borrow Aristotle’s phraseology. This refinement cannot in after life be taken out of the pocket and exhibited, it cannot be bought and it cannot be sold as can the useful scientific knowledge

of a specialist. And yet it is precious, and yet it is useful, and yet this revelation of lofty truth clothed in beautiful words themselves a part of the very truth, and uttered in musical measures which are the charms whereby falsehood is tamed, must be made to every man whose character we would fashion in the best way. In such an essential matter as this there can be no question of second best, and therefore, in order to make right education possible, the hard work of preparatory Greek study is imperative and unavoidable.

This training is equally indispensable for all, and I cannot help rejoicing that it should be so, for the alternative offered by the advocates of natural science—and theirs is the only alternative which deserves serious consideration— involves an absurdity, a premature performance of intellectual *hara kiri*. It demands that boys at the early age of ten or twelve should make an irreversible choice between literature and science. How can they choose intelligently and with any appreciation of the questions underlying such a decision? Will they not rather, if they really choose at all, be influenced by an ignorant bias or by the whimsey of idleness, and thus on the very threshhold of life acknowledge blind prejudice as their leader and make way with themselves before they can know themselves or others can know them?

There is practically and theoretically no escape for us; we must enlarge our traditional conception of the humanities, we must sooner or later agree definitely upon a common training for all who are to be admitted to college. Of course the bracing wind of science must be judiciously

tempered to the shorn lamb of literature, and we will not overtask the solid scientific mind with too much of the gymnastic discipline of language, but literature and science must be insisted upon for all. My answer—the Greek answer to the Greek question—is therefore: GREEK AND SCIENCE, SCIENCE AND GREEK.

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